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# The Conundrum of Human Trafficking in Africa

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## Abstract

This chapter explores the nature, extent and mystification of human trafficking in Africa. While human trafficking is an age-long, border-less crime of global proportion, its current form and dimensions have enormous negativity on the human race (generally), and pose enormous threats to peace and security on the African continent (specifically). Such consternation has engendered various stakeholders to introduce policy measures to curb the spread; however, rather than diminishing, it is ever increasing. From a positional standpoint, using document analysis, this chapter provides a synopsis of human trafficking in Africa, in recent times, and offers suggestions on pragmatic steps that could help address both the demand and supply end of this illicit criminal enterprise in twenty-first (21st) century Africa.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, crime, globalisation, Africa

## 1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a global issue that affects people from virtually every part of the world. Though statistics on the extent of the crime is hard to prove, anecdotal reports suggest that it is increasing [1]. For instance, more than 500 different trafficking flows were detected between 2012 and 2014 across the globe [1]. Similarly, from a recent global survey on human trafficking published by International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Walk Free Foundation, an estimated 40.3 million people were reported to be in modern slavery in 2017 [2]. While the total annual revenue accruing from human trafficking varies, depending on the source, but it is estimated to be between US\$ 5 and US\$42 billion [3].

Although human trafficking is common in different continents of the world, it is endemic in Africa. Africa has been bedevilled with a number of crisis, including high levels of unemployment, poverty, hunger, corruption, political and economic instabilities, to mention a few [4, 5]. These problems are exacerbated by tensions and insurrections, which have led to internal displacements of people. The quest for survival in the midst of these socio-political and economic crises have engendered high migration flow from one African State to another; from one African region to another, and from Africa to other continents. While some migration activities are legal, many others are carried out illegally. Meanwhile criminals regularly deceive migrants and traffick them into a world of different dimensions of exploitation. While the exact numbers and demographics of trafficked persons from Africa are unknown, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports often provide guestimates of the realities [6]. For instance, according to UNODC report

in 2016, a total of 69 countries detected human trafficking victims from Sub-Saharan Africa between 2012 and 2014 [1].

The scale of human trafficking in Africa came from alarm raised by activists, civil societies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), especially in Nigeria, Togo, South Africa, Benin Republic, to mention a few in the latter 1990s [7–10]. For instance, anecdotal reports indicated that human trafficking in West Africa has assumed alarming proportion since the mid-1990s [8, 11, 12]. Child trafficking also became prominent in West Africa when international media focused on the exposure of a ship code-named *Etireno* which was found on 17 April 2001 with children between the ages of 3 and 13 who were trafficked to Libreville, Gabon, from Lagos in Nigeria [11]. While there have been considerable efforts at international, national and regional levels at combating human trafficking in Africa, unfortunately, limited successes have been recorded [11, 13].

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the nature, extent and the complexities of human trafficking in Africa. It draws from a review of literature on human trafficking in different parts of Africa and beyond. The chapter begins with the conceptualisation of human trafficking, and moves onto an overview of human trafficking in Africa; the factors engendering human trafficking in Africa, and suggestions for effective response to it.

## **2. Human trafficking: conceptual clarifications**

Defining human trafficking is relatively contentious [2, 11, 14, 15]. Part of the controversy revolves around the array of activities that are involved in it. This could be part of the reasons why Gould [16] described it as ‘a slipping concept’ that is very difficult to pin down. Moreover, the controversy between traditional practices and modernisation sometimes blur the understanding and definition of the concept. Portrayals of human trafficking in Western democracies may be different from that of Africa [6]. For instance, a child hawking goods in public could be construed as a form of exploitation, but in some Western African societies, it could be part of the routines of a child in order to assist his/her parents [11].

The definition of human trafficking varies from scholar to scholar, and country to country. Most of the debates are rooted in divergent worldview, historical backgrounds and findings from studies conducted by scholars [17]. Trafficking in persons (human trafficking) is defined in article 2(a) of the 2000 *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* (Palermo Protocol), supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, as:

*The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.*

*Exploitation includes, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation...shall be irrelevant where any of the... [fore-mentioned] means...have been used. The recruitment, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered ‘trafficking in persons’, even if it does not involve ... [any of the above listed means].*

*'Child' shall mean any person under eighteen years of age (Article 3) (UNODC, 2004, p. 42).*

For the purpose of this article, human trafficking is defined as the deception, recruitment, transportation and transfer of persons, for the purpose of exploitation.

### **3. Human trafficking: an overview of human trafficking in Africa**

The end of the Cold War resulted in the rise of regional conflicts in Africa and the decline of borders, leading to an increased number of economic and political refugees [18, 19]. Since then, the rates of human trafficking in different parts of Africa have also increased considerably due to capacity gaps in the management of sub-regional economic cooperation and regional integration initiatives among African states [18]. This situation led to several interventions by policy makers and other stakeholders at the continental, regional and national levels. However, many African countries are still finding it very challenging to combat human trafficking due to ineffective policies and capacity, even where legislation is in place. The combination(s) of lack of political will, political and institutional corruption, and a range of other underlying perennial socio-economic problems that these countries are confronted with have made the fight against human trafficking almost insurmountable [7, 18].

Human trafficking is a dynamic phenomenon with a range of interlocking forces, factors and processes [6]. Trafficking issues and challenges often revolve around three variables, (though with two extreme ends)—the demand for cheap labour and exploitation on one hand, and the willingness to meet basic economic needs for survival on the other ([20], p. 7). It will be erroneous to describe human trafficking essentially as an economic cum security issue, perhaps due to the factors that entrap people into it.

Trafficking features in West Africa is complex, so are its routes. Countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon and Senegal are source, transit, and destination countries for trafficked women and children [1]. Trafficking of young girls from rural areas in countries such as Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Ghana to work in Cocoa plantations in Urban Cote D'Ivoire are also documented in literature [1]. Trafficking from and through eastern Nigeria to Gabon have increased in recent years [1]. According to United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) 2017 report, children made up over a quarter of detected trafficking victims in the world, and out of this, 64% are from sub-Saharan Africa. This figure would have increased in recent times due to current political and economic challenges in sub-Saharan Africa that have compelled several people, including women and children to leave their homes in search of new opportunities in neighbouring countries [21–29].

Similar to the experience in West Africa, human trafficking is prevalent in Southern Africa. Countries such as South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, and Lesotho are source, transit and destination countries for human trafficking [9]. However, unlike the West African scenario where the flow is multidimensional—one country could serve as the source, while another serve as the transit and destination point—trafficking geography in Southern Africa is relatively complicated. It involves complex trafficking flows from diverse countries of origin from Africa and the rest of the world [10]. In this region, South Africa serves as the rallying point. In addition to its status as the powerhouse of the sub-region, South Africa also serves as an economic hub on the African continent. Until recently, has the largest

economy in Africa [30], South Africa also serves as a major hub for trade in human commodity [6, 31]. It provides an enabling environment and market for the services of trafficked persons from the regional and extra-regional level [32]. Incessant crises that ravaged the Continent, such as political instabilities, insurrections, poverty, hunger, unemployment, kidnapping, terrorism, amongst others, make South Africa a magnet that attracts migration flows from other African countries [6, 33].

It is imperative to state that in the Southern African axis, South Africa serves mainly as the destination point. This is not to infer that South Africa is not a source or transit country for human trafficking, but as the economic hub of the region, South Africa is the main destination points for Southern African sub regional and extra-regional flows. Within South Africa, women and children are recruited and transported from the rural areas to cities, such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Cape Town and Durban, for exploitation [6]. While most girls work as domestic servants in wealthy homes, majority of the boys serve as street vendors, waiters, beggars on the roads, street urchins, labourers on farm lands and plantations, and for other criminal activities [6].

According to United States Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report [34], West African syndicates dominate and control the commercial sex business in Hillbrow (Johannesburg) and other urban centres across the State, local criminal rings control child prostitution in the country. While Russian and Bulgarian crime syndicates control prostitution business in the Cape Town axis, the Chinese nationals organise and coordinate the sex trafficking of Asian nationals [34].

Children are trafficked to South Africa from Lesotho's border towns; women and girls trafficked from Mozambique are destined for South Africa's Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal provinces [10]. In Malawi, women and girls are trafficked to northern Europe and South Africa. In addition to these configurations, women are also trafficked from Thailand, China, and Eastern Europe [35]. Ethnically based criminal syndicates in South Africa's refugee camps recruit and transport their victims, usually married women from their home countries.

In Lesotho, traffickers often recruit male and female street children, victims of physical and sexual abuse at home, or children orphaned by AIDS [7]. Such children normally migrate from rural areas and border towns to Maseru, the capital, from where they are trafficked by mostly South African white Afrikaans to work in farms in Eastern Cape. In Mozambique, men, women and children are trafficked from Maputo to Durban or Johannesburg for various exploitative purposes. While women and children are trafficked to provide sexual services to miners at West Rand, men are trafficked for labour related task at the mines [7, 35].

In East African axis, Ugandan and Kenyan women are trafficked for prostitution in the Gulf States. The incessant crises in Uganda created an avenue for rebel leaders to kidnap children, young girls and women from the opposition camps [34]. In addition to the locals, victims of trafficking in Uganda are from the Democratic of Congo (Congo DRC), Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and South Sudan [34]. While girls, young ladies and women are forced into prostitution, boys and men work in agricultural, construction and other labour related industries in Uganda [34] Similarly, Kenya serves as a source, transit and destination country for trafficking of young girls and women to and from Europe [34].

Human trafficking also thrives in North Africa. Virtually all countries in this region of Africa are source, transit and destination countries for trade in human commodity [7]. However, there may be variations in the volume of trafficked victims are transported from and into each of the countries in the region [7]. For instance, Algeria is more of a transit and destination country than a source country, unlike other countries in the region like Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia that are essentially a source, transit and destination countries for human trafficking [34].

Traffickers in this region of Africa target undocumented (illegal) migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, like Mali, Niger, Cameroon and Nigeria. The illegal status of such migrants and language barriers make them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation by traffickers who often deceive them with a view to make them fill the available vacancies in the labour and sexual trafficking industries [6]. Contrastively, illegal migrants often fall prey to traffickers in North Africa while trying to cross the borders of some of the countries in the region en route Europe with the perception of improving their lives. While Europe is their ultimate destination, travelling long distances through the desert, especially Sahara desert en route Europe make them vulnerable to exploitation. Due to the long distances they are to cover, and the cost of transportation, these illegal migrants often run out of money, seek avenues to survive. Traffickers, aware of their vulnerabilities subject them to labour and sexual exploitation (USTIP Report, 2016). In addition, in Egypt (precisely), women and children are vulnerable to labour and sexual exploitation (USTIP Report, 2016). Men from United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait and Saudi Arabia often purchase summer (temporary) marriages for commercial sexual exploitations. There are documentations of child sex tourism in Cairo, Luxor and Alexandria in Egypt (USTIP Report, 2016).

Studies have indicated an increase in migration flows across the world. Most of these flows are largely attributed to myriad of factors ranging from political upheaval, to economic-crises, ethnic discrimination, communal inequalities, civil wars to lack of viable means of livelihood ([7], p. 83; [36], p. 11; [37], p. 7). For people ensnared by hunger and poverty, migration through what Maggy Lee described as 'irregular channels of smuggling and trafficking' become an alternative means of survival or an escape route ([37], p. 7).

#### **4. The nexus between human trafficking in Africa and globalisation**

In Africa, human trafficking is of two dimensions - internal and external trafficking [1, 19]. Although there have been debates on the validity of this assertion, studies on human trafficking have shown that a country could serve as origin (source), transit and destination for trafficking operations [19]. For instance, citizens of countries as Canada, United Kingdom and New Zealand may find it difficult to accept that human trafficking thrives in their countries due to their tight border and sophisticated immigration control, however, studies have shown that virtually all country of the world is implicated in human trafficking web [19].

The market for this criminal trade is wide, owing to the lucrative nature of this business. The markets are often driven by highly sophisticated criminal gangs with network that span across States frontiers. The expansion of global market for trade and investment necessitated an increase in the demand and supply of people ([36], p. 26). Such expansion often culminates in high migration flow, and hibernating in the exodus of these individuals is this illicit trade (human trafficking). Similarly, globalisation created demographic disparities among the less-developed, developing and the developed countries, resulting in what Shelley referred to as 'the feminization of poverty' and 'marginalisation of rural communities' ([19], p. 3).

Globalisation has been enhanced considerably by the internet and the so called 'dark web' [1, 2]. Such platforms have often been exploited by traffickers to advertise and lure people into the trafficking world [2, 19]. Through the internet, several girls and ladies have been lured by traffickers (under the pretext of providing immigration services) to unknown destinations, where they are raped, and exploited [1]. Child pornography, online sex chats and other forms of illicit services, have been rendered by traffickers to different clients across the globe ([36], p. 130). Human

trafficking has also been linked with sporting events ([36], p. 141). However, there are arguments and counter-arguments about its actual estimate.

The wave of natural disasters that swept through several countries of the world due to global warming has left many people homeless, displaced and impoverished. Examples of these natural disasters include the tsunami that swept through the Southeast Asian countries, the hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, drought in Sudan, and earthquake in Haiti [36]. Unfortunately, humanitarian responses to most of these emergency situations have often been undermined by corruption [1, 15]. According to Shelley [19] most of the assistance programmes and initiatives to assist disaster victims have largely been inadequate, with most of the needed aid too often, have been diverted by corrupt officials. The combination of the loss of their lands—both commercial lands and residential lands, and the uncertainty of securing any opportunity in other sector of their national economy, these distressed people often become vulnerable, and easy prey for traffickers ([19], p. 38).

## **5. Forms of human trafficking in Africa and the criminals (forces) involved**

In Africa, trafficking in Persons is of two different types. Literatures on the phenomenon suggest the internal and external trafficking [38, 39]. Internal trafficking takes place within a country's territory (domestic trafficking). It usually takes the form of recruitment and movement of people from the rural to urban centres for various forms of exploitative work and or activities such as: prostitution, forced labour (as domestic servants), factory workers, workers in plantations and construction companies, drug peddlers, pick-pockets, waiters, among several others ([40], p. 4).

In contrast to the internal dimension, international trafficking takes the form of recruitment and movement of people from one country to another (cross-border trafficking) for the purpose of exploitation. The nature of exploitation in this form is also similar to the domestic form but in greater proportion. The demands are higher so also are the costs and implications. For most of the cross-border dimensions, the flows are usually between countries within the same region or neighbouring countries. Thus, the cross-border flow is not usually a distance one. However, there are instances of continental and intercontinental flows as well. According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), contemporarily, there are evidences of victims of human trafficking from the East Asian States found in over twenty (20) countries in regions across the globe, including the Americas, the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia and Africa ([41], p. 11).

The running of this global criminal enterprise is spearheaded by transnational criminal groups that cut across the continents of the world [1, 34]. These mafia groups combine drug trafficking, arms trafficking, money laundering and other forms of transnational crime with human trafficking—for both labour and sexual exploitation. According to Shelley, a combination of criminal gangs/organisations such as the Thai mafia, Indian criminal rings, Nigerian gang, Mexican group, Russian-speaking criminal ring, Albanian group and the Balkan criminal gang dominate the general human trafficking trade on a global scale [15, 34].

Regarding human trafficking for sexual exploitation, the combination of the Italian mafia families, Russian-speaking gang, Thai gang, Japanese Yakuza, the Triads, Jaotou, Jao Phro, Indian group, Sindikets (Syndicates in Malaysia), Fuk Ching in the United States dominate the trade [15, 34]. Other lesser mafia groups that dominate the sex trafficking market include the Dominican, Filipino and Turkish gang, amongst other trafficking entrepreneurs across the globe [15, 34, 42].

Most of these mafia organisations, especially those from the Asian axis have a turf, a hierarchical structure, restricted membership and often use violence to enforce compliance and exert authority [15, 34].

Contrastively, some other criminal networks of persons in human trade and other forms of transnational organised crime operate on an ad hoc basis, with no definite structure. It is instructive to state that most of these criminal groups have built strong empires of wealth and remained in the scene. Such vibrant structures were not necessarily fabricated due to the clandestine nature of the trade, but owing largely to the loopholes in most States structures and institutions (criminal justice), especially the police and border officials through corruption.

It is instructive to state at this juncture that the scale of research on human trafficking globally has been flooded with issues of sexual exploitation. Though a relatively appreciable volume also focus on the labour aspect, and few on organ harvesting, but the proportion of sexual domain is larger. The fact, however, is that the vast majority of modern day research findings have shown swelling incidences of trafficking of persons for labour exploitation in—agriculture, manufacturing industries, block factories, mining, fishing, domestic servants, carmel jockeys, pick-pockets, street vending, to mention a few [40].

The proportion of labour exploitation varies from State to State, from person to person, and often a function of the nature of task or work to be done (by trafficked victims). Labour exploitation often manifest itself in restriction of movement, seizure and confiscation of passport, daily verbal intimidation, cycles of abuses (rape, torture, beating, etc.), low wages, deduction or no pay at all, amongst others.

Contemporarily, the issue of human trafficking in Africa is taking a new dimension with the evolving menace of human trafficking into baby factories (or ‘baby farms’) for baby making coming to the centre stage. Onuoha [43] revealed this new wave of human trafficking in recent times. Though he argued that the incidence has been going-on for a while now in some parts of the world, but it is rising in a crescendo manner in Nigeria. However, it is very challenging to define the concept—‘baby factory’, ‘baby farming’ and ‘baby harvesting’ as they mean the same thing in this context, and as used by Onuoha.

Moreover, there is no legal definition for these terms since they are emerging concepts. However, according to Onuoha [43], baby factories ‘are locations where young ladies or girls, some teenagers or little above that, are harboured and deliberately encouraged or forced to become pregnant and subsequently give up their babies for sale’. Put differently, baby factory is an apartment or a form of accommodation in which teenagers and/or young ladies are kept (either voluntarily or by coercion), copulated, impregnated, and after delivery, their babies are taken away from them and sold to clients, agents or couples in need of babies. This could be done sometimes with or without the consent of the victims. This episode therefore brings to the fore a new concept in the human trafficking discourse: baby trafficking.

## **6. Factors contributing human trafficking in Africa**

It is pertinent to state at this juncture that the problem of trafficking often do not begin with the traffickers, but with the circumstances that force victims to seek better living conditions in environments that render them vulnerable to exploitation [44]. Contrary to the popular embellished image of trafficked persons as either kidnapped, or coerced into leaving their homes, more often than not, the initial decision to migrate is often a conscious one [6]. Such decisions are further heightened by some of the factors that bedevilled Africa as earlier indicated.

Trafficking business thrives in Africa due to a range of precipitating factors can be broadly grouped into two—the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors [6, 9, 10]. The push and pull factors are two sides of the same coin—the causes of one can also be the consequence of another. While the push factors are those issues and circumstances that drive or force people into accepting demands that render them susceptible to trafficking, the pull factors encapsulate those that influence people into accepting dehumanising offers. The push factors that contribute to human trafficking in Africa include, but are not limited to poverty, political instability, greed, peer pressure, and lack of legitimate and sustainable employment opportunities and corruption [6, 45–47]. The pull factors include but are not limited to high demand for organs and body parts, the demand for cheap and low-skilled labour, the effect of globalisation, weak border control, economic disparities between developed and developing countries [19, 48–51]. It is imperative to indicate that counter-trafficking measures in many African States have considerably been ineffective because most of the strategies have rested on the tripod stand of arrest, punishment and incarceration [17]. While these measures could thrive in addressing the proximate causes of the crime, the remote causes will require proactive measures that will facilitate the process of finding a durable solution its root causes.

## **7. Suggestions and conclusion**

This chapter began by underscoring the global resonance of human trafficking and its debilitating impacts on human lives, and international peace and security. It further explored the dynamics of human trafficking in Africa and the impacts of globalisation in engendering the rise and growth of trafficking businesses, in Africa as well as in other parts of the world. The factors and forces that created the artificial structures for trafficking to thrive in different parts of Africa were also identified and discussed. In addition, the root causes of human trafficking were highlighted. It also was indicated that except proactive and enduring measures are put in place at addressing those age-long root causes factors, State response to human trafficking in contemporary African States will be not be successful.

From the foregoing, to address the scourge of human trafficking in Africa, each State should first consider and find solution to the underlying or root causes of the crime. These factors are embedded in the countries’ socio-economic, political, and cultural milieus. If the various African countries address these factors, it will serve as trajectories to combating the phenomenon. Such task is however a collective responsibility of all relevant stakeholders, which include, the Government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), parents, civil societies, religious and educational institutions, and human rights groups, to mention a few.

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